

Marketing and Culture Matters In Central Asia

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Abstract

In most cases, the gamble for marketers in international marketing is not knowing the key cultural factors to market in target foreign markets such as in Kazakhstan/ Central Asia. Here, the author examines several cultural dimensions to understand Kazakhstan/ Central Asia as the target market's distinctive cultural traits to ensure the acceptance and success of the marketers. Culture, a set of core values and customs, exists to satisfy the needs of the people within a society. It offers order, and gives direction and guidance. Culture also offers 'standards' or 'rules' on what is appropriate and what is not appropriate; and in most instances, the impact of culture, in our everyday behavior, is so natural and automatic.

The Number Game

In China, the Chinese especially the Hongkongers, like puns, and when marketing to the Chinese; it should be noted that they are concerned with certain lucky numbers. They like 'good' numbers. Numbers such as 6 and 8 sounds like "luck" and "prosperity" respectively, and are thus appealing. Car license plates and mobile telephone numbers that carry such numbers are normally in demand. Numbers such as 4 are 'bad' and they are to be avoided since they sound very much like "death".

In Kazakhstan, numbers too play an important role in the sense that some numbers such as 7 or 9 are considered as good numbers. These are 'spiritual' or lucky numbers.

If you should give flowers, take note that you should give odd number of flowers for celebratory occasions such as weddings, thanks and birthdays and an even number of flowers at funerals.

Colors

Color is also a critical variable in international marketing, because the same color has different meanings in different cultures.

The Chinese may like red, the color of good luck and prosperity, but here in Central Asia, the colors yellow and green are well favored especially among the Muslims. White is also seen as a 'pure' color, and associated with the wedding rituals such as white wedding gowns. Blue is also another color that is preferred, since before the Kazakhs were converted to Muslims, they were animistic, and 'tengri' (a Turkic root word for sky) or the skies were worshipped or admired. Blue is also currently liked, as it is the national color, the color of the nation's flag. Speaking to several locals, this writer learnt that the color blue is also said to reflect the open sky and freedom, the freedom to choose and the country is also open to trade and for all nationalities to come. Similar to the Chinese, gold is also well liked by the Kazakhs. Gold (Kazakh word: "*altyn*") is symbolic of wealth and riches.

The color black is not generally seen as good since it is associated with death. It is also considered as the color of poverty. As the nation progresses, more people wish to wear more colorful clothes. However, this writer figures that increasingly, most teenagers are seeing black as the color of being trendy and modern.

Promotional Problems

When communicating with consumers in different parts of the world, the brand name and promotional message must be consistent with the language and customs of the particular target society.

The word "clock" in Chinese sounds like the word death. In Kazakhstan and Central Asia, after speaking to several people, the writer uncovers that the Russian-speaking people may indeed not perceive Vidal Sassoon, the shampoo, the name in Russian as good. There is trouble even in some English words when pronounced in Russian. The word "pizza", for example, when pronounced in the right and proper way may be perceived as a bad or vulgar word.

Several respondents suggest to this researcher that where food dishes are concerned, the best name is "*Dastarkhan*". In Kazakh, the word means table filled or complete with food, and this restaurant chain has become successful in marketing and promoting Kazakh food dishes. The restaurant chain has a good brand name; it has incorporated the critical LOCAL taste!

Packaging and Pricing Problems

International marketers need to package and price their products to meet the local economic conditions and customs (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). In transition economies such as in Central Asia such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, small-sized product packages often are a necessity because consumers cannot afford the cash outlay required for the larger sizes popular in the United States. When households can afford it and have some luxuries, small-sized television, and audio-equipment are normally purchased in order to meet their household budgets.

Relationship-building

Next in Kazakhstan when marketing, selling and growing one's business, one needs to build ones' contacts, relationships and networks. "*Karim katynas*" (in Kazakh) meaning relationships in the Kazakh language are so critical in Kazakhstan or for that matter, in any Central Asian countries. In these tea('chai')-drinking countries,



informalities are stressed. Businessmen prefer eating and drinking with their business partners, creating hospitable ambience helps a lot. Businesspeople make their guests feel at ease, turning a relationship from strictly business to one of lasting friendship (Low, 2005). When getting to know your business counterparts, don't speak too loudly or point directly to the other person.

Americans tend to place an almost sacred value on youthfulness, reflecting America's rapid technological development. However in Central Asia, one shows respect to the seniors, and they are associated with the wisdom of experience that comes with age. One should indeed show respect to older people by using their patronymic names when addressing them.

For gifts, don't bring a knife since this would mean severing a relationship. If you really have to give, then get a small coin back so that the knife is purchased.

Dinners and Toasts

When invited to dinner, do come on time and be prepared to give flowery toast, and perhaps be ready to sing a song too. As a guest, one should never be offered an empty plate, and guests should never refuse to eat when offered. The latter is considered as an insult to the family, suggesting that the guest does not trust them. At the very least, accept a slice of bread or cake and take one bite from it.

Indeed, certain Kazakh traditions and superstitions need to be observed too, and these include not shaking hands or offering gifts over the threshold. To do so is considered as bad luck. O yes, do not whistle in the house too or one's money will fly away.

Traditional Kazakh tradition is nomadic, and because the nomads need staying power in the saddle, they prize fatty foods. Foreigners may find the 'Besbarmak' (literally it means 'five finger-food', a dish of stewed meat served over noodles with potatoes and fresh herbs) or other meat dishes, especially those served in the rural areas, are

greasier than one normally prefers. Using bread to sop up the grease can help a lot (AIWC, 2000).

As a guest regardless of one's ethnic origin, one will be offered many alcoholic beverages especially one is a man. The exception to this is if one is in a strict Muslim household where only non-alcoholic drinks will be served. Otherwise, one is usually served with beer or vodka. Vodka may be drunk neat from 'small', often beautifully decorated cups.

Back to Cultural Roots

In transitional economies though there may be some westernization trend (Low and Ibrayeva, 2005), people tended to go back to appreciating their national heritage: national culture, language, history, music, traditions, and cuisines. As argued by Low and Ibrayeva, 2005, perhaps due to nationalism or simply the preference and the liking of people to be closer to their cultural roots, national songs and compositions such as those of "Ulytau" – instrumental group: "dombyra" (the Kazakh musical instrument), guitar and violin were fast gaining acceptance and in some cases becoming popular. Songs in Kazakh were also more listened to. Marketers were trying to use the national themes in advertising, design, political campaigns ("Asar") and the like. Besides, expensive elite Kazakh restaurants were opened and frequented. Specialists with knowledge of Kazakh language and culture were more in demand both due to the cultural in-thing as well as the state documentation requirements.

In concluding, overall, one needs to take whatever one experiences as a learning experience and grow. Indeed, understanding the cultures of the societies here in Central Asia can help marketers and their products to be increasingly accepted.

References

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